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Recordings of African Popular Music: A Valuable Source for Historians of Africa

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RECORDINGS OF AFRICAN POPULAR MUSIC: A VALUABLE SOURCE FOR HISTORIANS OF AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

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I

In December 2002 the Swiss Society for Ethnomusicology (CH-EM), in cooperation with the Centre for African Studies of the University of Basel and with mission 21 (formerly Basel Mission), organized a symposium on the theme "Popular Music from Ghana: Historical Records as a Contribution to the Study of African History and Culture." The conference concluded a week of lectures, workshops, and concerts with Ghanaian "palmwine" and Highlife music, a program which was realized in cooperation with the Basel Academy of Music and the two associations, Ghana Popular Music 1931-1957 and Scientific African e.V.¹ The papers read at the symposium are, in our opinion, of interest to the readers of *History in Africa*, as they discuss a specific kind of source and the methodological issues pertaining to it, as well as offer insights into possible themes of research, giving some idea of the potential of the recordings as a source. We present the contributions here in a slightly revised form, and, in order to round off the discussion, we have invited the curators of two further sound collections of

¹Support came from the Maja Sacher Foundation, the ministries of education of the Kanton Basel-Landschaft and the Kanton Basel-Stadt, Coordinarte and the Deutscher Musikrat. For further information see www.scientific-african.org/workshop02.

interest to scholars working on African history, to describe their archives.

The starting point for the conference was the unique collection of popular music recorded in west Africa by the Union Trade Company of Basel (UTC). This collection was recently transferred to the public archives of mission 21 and is being made accessible to the public. The objectives of the conference were two-fold. On the one hand it was to gather the expertise of specialists concerned with sound collections and to have them comment critically on the project. These specialists were present in the persons of Janet Topp Fargion, the curator of the World and Traditional Music Section of the British Library Sound Archive, an ethnomusicologist who has worked on east Africa, and Wolfgang Bender of the Institute of Ethnology of the University of Mainz. Bender has built up the African Music Archive there, which has become a focal point at the Gutenberg University's Institute of African Studies.

The conference was also designed to show the potential of such recordings of African music and of whole collections thereof. John Collins of the University of Ghana explored the connections between Christianity and popular music in Ghana from the first missionary encounters to the rise of African independent and Pentecostal churches. Sjaak van der Geest of the University of Amsterdam offered insights into his work on the lyrics of Ghanaian Highlife songs. In his contribution he deals with the image of the orphan and its plight—a recurrent theme of Highlife songs. Veit Arlt introduced the UTC sound collection, presenting its history on the background of the company's history and its content, as well as the project to make it accessible to scholars and to the public in general. This collection not only initiated the meeting, but also provides us with the ethnomusicological linkage holding the contributions together.

We have assembled the responses by Wolfgang Bender to the three papers presented at the conference as a fourth text. They are based on the rich experience of one of the leading European experts for the study of modern African music and for the preservation of its recordings. Janet Topp Fargion presents the organization, the collections and the activities of the World and Traditional Music Section at the British Library Sound Archive placing them in the wider context of ethnomusicological documentation. Finally we have added a contribution by Kwame Sarpong, the founder of the Gramophone Records Museum at Cape Coast. This museum probably has the most extensive collection of Ghanaian popular music and, luckily for researchers and music lovers alike, it is in the process of digitizing it in cooperation with, and with support from a Canadian institution. Sarpong's article not only introduces the collection, but it also gives insight into an ambitious dig-

itization project, which is being realized with state-of-the-art methods and technology and will make the sounds, together with supplementary information, accessible on the internet. The idea behind these additional texts is to show where we are today in collecting, preserving, and making accessible old (and new) music recordings as an extremely rich and important source for the ethnological and historical understanding of African cultures.

The papers by John Collins and Sjaak van der Geest deal with textual and contextual aspects of Ghanaian Highlife. They reveal information on what the old records contain (and hide) in their music and songs, and give us a good example of how such treasures can and should be explored, for it is obvious that treasures can be found here. Unfortunately we have to admit, that even within contemporary ethnomusicology there is still a lot of disregard and mistrust concerning “modern” (or “popular” or even “so-called popular”) African music. A few remarks by Arlt, and especially by Bender, point clearly to this problem. It seems that the old concept of ethnomusicology is still alive. In several German universities ethnomusicology is still labeled “comparative” or “systematic musicology” and is strictly separated from the “real musicology”—the study of (European) music history. This concept is based on the idea that music in oral traditions, and especially non-European music, is (or has to be) marked by stability, persistence, and purity. In consequence, only what is “old” and “traditional” seems worth studying, as if something like the vestiges of a former state of mankind could be found here.

The false premises of this concept, and the resulting misunderstandings, are obvious: we forget that every musical event is a momentary one and that there have always and everywhere been contacts, influences, and changes. What Collins describes here as “full circle,” i.e., the mutual musical, religious, and social impacts from both the Western and the African side, is a good example for an ethnomusicological approach to “modern” African music, as are Van der Geest’s interpretations of Highlife lyrics. We have to learn that African cultures show a highly-developed ability to integrate influences, and that the appropriation of foreign instruments, music styles and performance practices does not signify a loss of traditional values. The papers presented in this issue may present a helpful starting point to reconsider the phenomenon of cultural change and we hope they will incite historians of Africa to explore historical recordings of popular music as a resource for their research.